IN PRAISE OF COMMON VIRTUE
Luke 3:10-18
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Most of the ethical dilemmas which trouble us have to do with the extremities, not the mainstream, of life. Most of the moral quandries which catch our imagination are located out on the edges, not in the middle where we do most of our living. Whether to bear an unwanted child or to have an abortion; whether a convicted murderer should spend life in prison or be executed; whether a nuclear bomb should be dropped in retaliation, in anticipation, or at all; whether a critically ill person should be kept alive by heroic medical technology or allowed to die.....those are extremely important questions. There is a sense in which our culture determines its essential nature by the way it responds to them. And there is a sense in which the relevance or irrelevance of any religion is revealed by the way it deals with the important moral questions of the day.

However, the simple truth is that most of us will not have to make an ethical determination in those critical areas today, or tomorrow, or this month, for that matter. The truth is that, while we are accountable to meet the moral ambiguity of our age head-on, and while Presbyterians have always felt called to be deeply involved in critical ethical questions, we will not personally have to make a definitive decision about many of the particularities. We will, however, have to live in relationship with other people, today, and tomorrow, and for the rest of the month, for that matter. We will have to pay bills, buy groceries, practice the piano, go to work, and live in various kinds and levels of human community. We may not be called on to decide whether or not to drop the bomb. But we will surely decide to be kind or rude, thoughtful or thoughtless, dishonest or candid, a number of times before this day is out. Religion ought to account for that as well as the dramatic moralities. Thus, a sermon in praise of common virtue.

Two literary episodes caught my imagination recently. The first is recounted in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Palm Sunday. The title refers to an invitation Vonnegut received and accepted from St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Manhattan to preach a sermon on Palm Sunday. Once a year the church invites a member of the artistic -- literary community to be in the pulpit. Vonnegut calls himself a God-fearing agnostic, not an orthodox Christian. From the pulpit of St. Clements he said, "I am enchanted with the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by - and then we will have two good ideas...." (p.325) Vonnegut, who has a great deal to say about war and violence and sex and marriage, believes that the fundamental human problem is loneliness. "If things were right," he writes, "nobody would have to go on a hopeless quest for friendly strangers, which is what most Americans have to do. Massage parlours come to mind, bus stations and singles bars."

In addition to Kurt Vonnegut's celebration of a simple morality my imagination was caught by the lesson for the day. In St. Luke's introduction of the mature Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, there is a seldom-noticed episode involving John the Baptist. John's role in the drama of the New Testament is forerunner. He saw himself, apparently, as the "voice of one crying in the wilderness" promised by the prophet Isaiah centuries before. "Prepare the way of the Lord," that ancient voice had warned and that is what John was saying to crowds of people along the banks of the Jordan River, at the edge of the wilderness, about the year 30 A.D. John told whoever would listen that the Lord was coming, that salvation was about to become a reality in front of their very eyes. Part of what is about to happen, John said, will be an accounting, a judgment. Like the good fire-breathing evangelist he was, John issued a sharp warning that unless there was a dramatic change in the way people

were living, the Lord's coming was not going to be a very happy day.

John persuaded his listeners that his diagnosis of their situation was accurate: that they were in deep trouble. They asked next what all of us would ask in that situation: "What shall we do? What can we do about the situation?" But John's response to this highly critical question is rather curious, ordinary really.

What shall we do? - "If you have two coats, share with someone who has none. If you are a tax collector - don't cheat. If you are a soldier - be a good soldier; don't steal and don't complain."

That strikes us as almost superficial. John's advice sounds like a series of platitudes, moral cliche's. What do you make of it? John had an opportunity to propose radical life-changes. People were virtually begging him to redesign their lives, to prescribe far-reaching alterations in the way they were living and he said, in effect, --"carry on. Do whatever you are doing, well. Do it honestly, fairly, with kindness."

I was involved in a college commencement recently and, as is usually the case, heard a lot of speeches. I was utterly fascinated with one: with a charge to the graduates by a professor they chose, the Head of the Education department. He delivered the simplest speech I ever heard. He said three things. He said....."learn more than you now know, because what you know isn't really very much. Forget about money for awhile: learn some more instead." He said, "Don't forget your family." And he said, "Stay healthy.....don't drink too much and don't make yourself ill with stress." And he said, "send your children to Muskingum College." and he sat down. I thought - the same thought surely as those anxious souls on the banks of the Jordan listening to John - "Is that all there is. Don't I have to do something extraordinary and strenuous? Doesn't the occasion call for a radical departure from all that is past?"

And then it started to become clear. Common virtue isn't easy. Maybe it's more difficult than extraordinary virtue, in fact. Maybe we ought to talk more about the ordinary virtues,.....hard work, excellence, integrity, kindness, as well as the more heroic.

That was done publically, by the way, recently in a way that surprised everyone. The most acclaimed motion picture of the season was "Chariots of Fire." It's popularity was due, in part, I believe, to the fact that it celebrates common virtue. The characters are extraordinary people to be sure: two British sprinters in the 1924 Olympics: one the son of Lithuanian Jewish merchants, a Cambridge student; the other, a Scottish divinity student, son of missionaries to China. But the subject of the movie is common virtue, dedication to personal excellence, uncompromising integrity and the magnificence of the individual human spirit when under the compulsion of devotion. Eric Liddell, the Scotsman, has to struggle between two very strong attractions - the mission field and the olympic games. After winning a race in a Highland game, he reveals his joy in running. His sister protests and urges him to forget running and devote himself to the mission. The moral choice between being a missionary and an athlete would seem to be clear. Extraordinary virtue would seem to lie in the mission field. His father, however, very wisely counsels, "You can praise the Lord by peeling a spud if you peel it to perfection. Run in His name...and let the world stand back in wonder." Later, after he has made his decision to pursue the olympic games, Liddell says, "I believe God made me for a purpose. But he also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure. To win is to honor him."

Common virtue is celebrated again in the movie when Liddell refuses to run in the 100 meter dash because the heats will be held on Sunday. In a meeting with the Prince

of Wales and the British Olympic Commissioner he, very simply, honors God more than King, Country, or Sport. The audience watching the movie, I felt, wants him to compromise, is almost audibly pulling for him to soften his strong moral stand and run the race. It is a laboratory experience in the difficulty of common virtue.

In recent years analysts of our culture have pondered the spectacular pupularity of jogging and distance running, at the very time the ethicists had decided we were becoming very soft morally. There are, I suppose, a host of reasons for the recent popularity of running as a favorite American pasttime. Among them surely is the fact that running is hard work, and in spite of a culture dedicated to eliminating discomfort of any sort, deep inside nearly all of us is the conviction that there is something essentially good about working hard and extending oneself. Johnny Kelley, for those not familiar with the important names in distance running, is a 74 year old man who has run in 51 Boston marathons. He won in 1935 and 1945. Time Magazine interviewed Mr. Kelley recently in relation to an article on the fact that the Boston marathon will no longer be a strictly amateur event. Kelley said- "I'm as confused as all get out - when I was young people did hard things for the pure joy of doing them." Let me add quickly that running a marathon is a very hard thing to do, even if there is a monetary prize at the end of it. But Mr. Kelley was expressing the basic human attraction to common virtue and its difficulty.

In praise of common virtue, then, when people asked him what they should do to prepare for salvation, John the Baptist said something like "carry on." Do what you are doing well, honestly and kindly. In celebration then, of the significance of ordinary morality: of hard work, of pushing oneself to one's own limits, of getting out of oneself every ounce of capability: in celebration of the Christian significance of the ordinary...of kindness and gentleness, of fair play and compassion and thoughtfulness.

It may be that common virtue is the greatest challenge of all. Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner wrote, "To keep on through dull, tedious, everyday existence can be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride and self-satisfaction." (Meditations on Hope and Love, p. 23) That prompted me to think, frankly, of Albert Schweitzer, twentieth century saint, who was satisfied with nothing less than direct service and personal involvement with indigenous people in Africa and who has been rightly and properly celebrated for that example. But Schweitzer always makes me think of all the others who shared a bit of his vision but stayed home to pay the bills. Whatever the church is able to do in the world; in Africa, Asia, or nationally through the agencies of the denomination, or locally through this particular congregation, is due not only to heroic and dramatic sacrifice by a few, but equally because many people go to work and earn a living and pay their bills and then give money - unnecessarily, generously, but undramatically.

Karl Rahner believes that life is always maneuvering us into a position where common, simple virtue is not easy. I think he is correct. We have thought long and hard about the big issues, but we have not acknowledged the simple fact that the hardest moral choices, and certainly the most common, are close to home. To be honest when paying taxes, to be kind to a spouse when you feel tired, to attend a meeting you said you would attend, to do a job you agreed to do, to keep faith - to be loyal, to keep your promises and vows, these are the ethical concerns we contend with every day. They are not easy. They are not very dramatic. They often do not pay us much by way of reward. Who, after all, ever was recognized for being honest with the IRS or attending a PTA meeting, or being attentive to a boring friend.

The truth is that common virtue is not common at all: that self discipline,

honest effort, loyalty are the truly heroic virtues. The truth is that something akin to that is basic to the Christian Gospel. Jesus Christ called people to be disciples in the world in common, ordinary, life.

Rahner takes us into deeper waters by suggesting that:

> "God is the one whom we meet, even though perhaps without naming him, and unconsciously, when we dare to be foolish, when we avoid conflicts and power struggles that we had a chance of winning: when we love without the initial certainity of being loved in return; when we remain true to our convictions even to our disadvantage." (ibid., page 25)

Jesus Christ came among us in the common place, the ordinary. The whole, incredible proposition we call Incarnation is the idea that in Jesus of Nazareth, the creator and redeemer God has walked among us: that in the ordinariness of that human life all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. At its best, the Presbyterian response to that proposition has been equally ordinary; not in cloister, monastery or cathedral, but in o..dinary human lives lived honestly and compassionately in the world. Not everyone can or should obey Jesus Christ dramatically. Not all can or should go to a mission field...

The common life is the place where most of us must make some sense out of things, where all the meaning we can ever hope to enjoy must be established. It is most certainly where I see Christian life lived out - in honesty, caring, generosity, loyalty. God blesses that. God's son came to live like that. God is pleased and honored when common virtue is celebrated. And God's Kingdom comes, the Bible suggests, when ordinary people live extraordinary lives of honesty, fairness and kindness.

AMEN.

God of mercy, help us to see the simple, clear truth. Give us strength to live with decency and consideration; to give you praise by doing well, what we are called to do: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.